



EUROBAROMETER 2004.1

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE CANDIDATE COUNTRIES

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NATIONAL REPORT

MALTA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The interpretation and opinions contained in it are solely those of the authors.

Executive Summary

This report covers the results of the wave conducted in Malta during the months of February-March 2004 as part of the Candidate Countries Eurobarometer research

Expectations

The general trend of short-term life expectations in Malta shows that the percentage of respondents who believe that their life will remain the same has decreased since winter 2000. The most striking aspect of this decrease stems from an awareness that some form of change is expected. The greatest drop in percentage was between autumn 2003 and spring 2004 when EU Accession started to become more of a reality to Maltese people.

An improvement in life expectations in the medium term (next 5 years), from a personal perspective is foreseen by respondents. This could be explained by a rather down-to-earth and pragmatic belief that life will be hard in beginning (soon after Accession) but will become more stable and eventually improve once EU membership would have become more ingrained in the mentality of the Maltese.

In terms of satisfaction with life domains, specifically with the economic situation in Malta, respondents are not foreseeing the year to come to be a good one.

More stability is perceived in the immediate households from a financial perspective. Almost one out of every two respondents believes that their financial situation will remain the same.

Perceptions of the financial situation in Maltese households indicate that the most concerned are respondents belonging to the 25-39 year old age bracket followed by the 40-59 years age group. Concerns can be mainly attributed to uncertainty in the job market which is starting to be felt in Malta.

Trust in EU Institutions

The most trusted institutions in Malta are charitable/voluntary organizations, followed by religious institutions and the army. The ranking of the first two institutions is a clear reflection of the values which are still strong and given great importance in Malta. The church still has a strong influence in Malta and many charitable organizations are also run by the church.

Trust in government has increased since 2001. Level of trust shot up in spring 2003, this time coincides with the time of the Referendum on EU Accession. The country had to make an important decision and government gained support during the EU campaign.

Knowledge about the European Union

Perceived knowledge about the European Union was measured on a scale from one to ten, ten being the maximum rate. Results show a moderate rate of perceived knowledge. Perceived knowledge of the EU appears to be related to perceptions about European Union membership in that lower levels of perceived knowledge were present among respondents who believe that EU membership is “a bad thing”.

Knowledge of EU related facts was rather high among Maltese respondents – higher than perceived knowledge about the EU. The feeling of knowing less than in actual fact one knows could be attributed to a general perception that the European Union and its institutions is very complex.

Even though the level of knowledge of EU related facts is quite high when compared to the NMS-10 and EU-25 average, this does not mean that respondents feel they know a lot about the EU. Perceived knowledge goes deeper into the respondents' beliefs and perceptions about the EU as a whole.

Knowledge about the Maltese accession process is greater than knowledge about the enlargement in general. In terms of coverage in national media, the EU was given great deal of importance especially when the Referendum was approaching. Three out of ten respondents believe that the EU was portrayed too positively while around four out of ten respondents think that the EU was portrayed objectively.

Awareness of EU institutions was rather high throughout among Maltese respondents except for the European Court of Auditors, the Committee of the Regions of the European Union and the Social and Economic Committee of the European Union.

The level of awareness of EU institutions is slightly higher when compared to the NMS-10 and the EU-25 average except for the three institutions mentioned above. Low levels of awareness of the latter may be attributed to lack of popularity in comparison with other institutions which are also mentioned more by the media.

The perception about the importance in terms of the role that these institutions have is related to the level of awareness of the same institutions. The higher the level of awareness, the more important the role is perceived to be.

Support for EU Membership

Support for EU membership has increased steadily since winter 1999. The highest percentage was recorded in autumn 2003 a few months after the referendum. While the percentage of respondents who believe that EU membership is a good thing has increased, the percentage of respondents who believe that EU membership is a bad thing has decreased since 1999 leaving those who believe that it neither good or bad somewhere in the middle and with a percentage which has more or less remained rather constant except for 1999, when the amount of undecided respondents was quite high.

The most supported EU policy by Maltese respondents is the enlargement of the European Union. Support for this policy has remained rather stable since 2003. The second most supported policy is a common defence and security policy among European Union Member States, followed by one common foreign policy among the Member States towards other countries. The Euro is supported by almost one out of two. The Euro has more support in the other New Member States than in Malta.

Support for most policies was slightly lower in Malta when compared to the NMS-10 and EU-25 averages.

Meaning of the European Union

Europe and the European Union are words which have been used interchangeably since membership with the EU has gained more importance and since accession has become a reality. For more than one out of every two respondents, the EU means freedom to travel, work and study. The EU also means having a stronger say in the world. This means a lot for Maltese people - the EU is seen as an opportunity to be heard being so small. Democracy, peace and cultural diversity were also mentioned by many respondents – this shows that the Maltese are attaching core values to the meaning of the European Union. Economic prosperity was also mentioned by many respondents but was not mentioned as much as freedom to travel, work and study. This indicates a rather active perception about the economy and the EU as opposed to a passive one.

In general Maltese people tend to perceive the role of the European Union as a policy-making role. This can be observed by analysing the perceptions of respondents on issue such as the protection of the environment, the educational system and the health care system. Maltese people look up to the European Union when it comes to the role that it has vis-à-vis the improvement of policies in the various Member States. This is why, respondents view the role of the EU positively on most issues presented to them.

Fears related to membership are common to most New Member States particularly the transfer of jobs to countries which have lower production costs.

Respondents appeared to be less concerned about factors related to cultural identity and preservation of the language. Most Maltese people feel that the European Union is reassuring its citizens on these matters and policies aimed at protecting these values are already in place.

National Identity

National identity among New Member States and the EU-15 is stronger than European Identity. The percentage of respondents claiming that they feel European only is very low as opposed to a significant percentage of respondents who claim that they feel both European and their nationality. In Malta the trend is not different – three out of 10 respondents will still see themselves only as Maltese in the near future, therefore they identify with their nationality only. Six out of ten respondents think of themselves as both Maltese and European.

Reform and the EU Constitution

The institutional reform of the European Union has been subject to a lot of debate when the Constitution was drafted. Support has been relatively high since autumn 2002, the lowest percentage recorded was in spring 2004. According to four out of ten respondents, the right to veto should be retained as it is in order to preserve national interests. The equivalent percentage for NMS-10 was higher. Preferences in the reform of the voting method in the European Union Council of Ministers seem to be more inclined to the option of each Member State having one vote. This view was supported by more than one out of every two respondents. Around three out of ten respondents stated that the number of votes should be proportionate to the population. This option was less popular in Malta than in NMS-10 and EU-15. Naturally a significant smaller population would determine Malta's contribution in decision-making matters.